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Accountable to Whom? Assessment for What?

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Can there be anyone in the honors community or higher education who has not been assaulted by campus assessment initiatives in the recent past or the present? The current agitation surrounding this topic is equaled only by the absence of clear ideas about the purpose or utility of assessment. While assessment's proponents believe that its aims and virtues are obvious, most of the academic community is either vexed or bemused by the whole thing. How has higher education arrived at this juncture, and where are we going in regard to assessment? I will try to give some answers to these questions. As will become obvious, at least in the state of Washington assessment began as a political issue and in response to "public" concerns about higher education, but it is increasingly driven by pressures internal to higher education itself. Additionally, it is not at all clear that assessment is measuring anything meaningful.

The impetus to assess higher education in Washington originated outside higher education itself, springing from political concerns about accountability and a sense that public higher education was under-educating or miseducating students. Like all politically driven initiatives, it sprang as much from the re-election needs of legislators as from any genuine concern with issues relevant to higher education itself, and at least according to my reading of the tea leaves in my own state, the initiatives here were "hero bills," i.e., measures legislators were bound to introduce as a result of promises they made on the campaign trail.

Of course, assessment means assessors, and so the office on my campus responsible for a number of activities, e.g., administration of student evaluation of teaching, collection of various kinds of data for the state legislature, and production of reports for internal and external constituencies on a number of aspects of student satisfaction, became the home of assessment. On this campus, state mandates found an ally, able and ready to collect information and assume responsibility for assessment, indeed to take up the banner and act as advocates for the process.

National efforts have joined local ones in depicting assessment as a positive good. In the words of one of its advocates, Richard Hersh, a Senior Fellow at the Council for Aid to Education, "it is an educational, professional, and ethical duty of higher education to assess its impact on student learning in ways that promote our educational mission and at the same time improve accountability" (Hersch, 1). The very passion of assessment's constituents is a measure of both the hollowness that comes of taking this sort of initiative as an ethical imperative and the utter lack of

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intellectual underpinning for it. Poor Kant would shudder, indeed may well be shuddering at this very moment. In fact, while many are willing to trumpet the necessity of assessment, nowhere have I seen a reasoned pedagogical justification for its practice, nor is one likely to be forthcoming. I have seen no evidence that assessment has led to any demonstrable improvement in higher education, and save for the accountability portion, I think, no one can produce such evidence. We do have more things to report to the legislature, whether or not those things have any value, educationally or otherwise.

Above all, I believe, assessment defects stem from its demands for immediate answers to questions about a very long process and, in its most important aspects, a life-long process. Does it even make any sense to pose these sorts of questions to a first-year college student? There is no need to continue the litany, but it is worth asking about the grist for the mill of assessment. As Alexander (Sandy) Astin of UCLA, among the nation's most careful students of assessment, has so trenchantly noted, the strongest and most persistent correlation on the most common assessment instrument, student evaluations of teaching, is between numbers and grades—classes filled with students who receive high grades generally also receive good numerical evaluations, and those whose students receive low grades generally score low. In other words, students assess (grade) their professor about the way their professors assess (grade) them; someone who gives very few A grades and many C grades in addition to Ds and Fs is unlikely to score well. Faculty, especially untenured faculty, learn these lessons very quickly and well (Boyer, 17-32 and 131-82). Unfortunately, these and similarly suspect data are being turned into data for use by the assessment mill.

A generation ago Michael Polanyi's notion of "tacit knowing" prevailed on many campuses (Polanyi, 29-39; Polanyi and Prosch, 34-5 and 52-3). Boards of trustees and state legislatures would become outraged over one or another aspect of higher education. University administrators would appear to share that outrage, and faculty would appear to respond, however half-heartedly, to the challenge. I believe there was a shared set of unstated assumptions among both faculty and administrators regarding the need to shield the content and processes of higher education as well as faculty and students from the grosser forms of evil that resulted from untoward interference. The contemporary situation is quite different, and outside bodies now seem to have campus allies in both central administrations and assessment offices who permit interference with the processes of higher education to a degree heretofore unknown in the academy. It very well may be that an alliance has grown up between assessment offices and assessment initiatives, and the second of these are increasingly becoming a significant part of the *raison d'être* of the first.

Above all else, assessment has had a very unwholesome effect on the proper business of the academy, which is ultimately nothing less (or for that matter, nothing more) than learning. It subverts the process for non-educational ends and makes assessment an end in itself, no matter its worth. It asks trivial questions, e.g., about "the clarity of the course's goals and objectives" (wording taken directly from my institution's student evaluation of teaching form) and consequently elicits trivial answers. It then quantifies the results and inflates them with an air of genuine significance. Moreover, it asks questions of people who are not very well equipped to give

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good answers. After all, how can an eighteen-year-old make meaningful evaluations of material whose real worth will be evident only years, sometimes many years after the fact?

The above is certainly screed to a degree, but it also indicates the dimensions of the problem. Assessment is impoverishing the educational process, first by draining resources away from other, far more beneficial activities, e.g., more sections, and also by standardizing it. In the latter regard, it is often a positive good that a syllabus and a course's ultimate aim be left open-ended, and it is by no means a bad thing that students leave a class with a degree of uncertainty, with the realization that there are answers that they do not know and must continue to seek, even though lack of clear goals and objectives does not make good grist for the assessment mill. Educational psychological agendas and issues, more properly relegated to the world of secondary schools, alas have become staples in the realm of higher education.

These are depressing realities, and I have no easy solutions for the assessment problems that plague and will continue to plague us. If the fight is to be sustained—I do not imagine victory is possible over the short term and perhaps not over the longer term either—it must be fought not only on individual campuses but nationally, and I think it is here that NCHC can make a significant contribution. By framing well argued and well supported assessments of assessment itself, we, and here I mean honors administrators, can perhaps begin to make headway against it. The fight will be a long one, and I am not hopeful that its outcome will be successful, but I am equally certain it is a fight we must undertake.

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